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AUTHOR van Kraayenoord, Christina E.
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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the creation of communities of literacy practice in classrooms can contribute to students' development of learnings of and about language, literacy, and texts. Such development can occur when literacy learning is seen as a social practice shaped by complex and dynamic participants and events. In these communities, participants interact to construct knowledge; they take on different roles and are engaged with language, literacy, and texts in reflective and critically thoughtful ways. Pedagogies refer to teaching approaches that recognize individual abilities and needs and aim to develop deep understanding, higher order thinking skills, an appreciation of multiple points of view, and a willingness to engage in social action. The five approaches recommended are: explicit teaching; scaffolding; joint construction; guided speaking, listening, reading, and writing; and teaching for repetition and practice. Attention to the provision of meaningful environments, the teacher's and students' roles, and the use of pedagogies such as have been suggested in the paper as features of communities of literacy practice will foster these goals. Contains 31 references. (NKA)

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Features of Communities of Literacy Practice

Christina E. van Kraayenoord
Schonell Special Education Research Centre
The University of Queensland
Queensland 4072
Australia

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C.E. van Kraayenoord

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Features of Communities of Literacy Practice

Recent understandings of literacy learning have suggested that teachers and students are engaged in processes of reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing which are strongly tied to specific social contexts (Myers (1992). The processes of literacy are learned in social interaction with others and these processes are shaped by the settings in which they occur. In other words, literacy is seen as a social practice which takes place variously in different contexts.

Based on the notion that literacy is a social practice, students involved in the acquisition and development of literacy have been seen in the literature as active constructors of the activities in which they engage (Green, 1990; Heap, 1991). Specifically they are involved in the creation of negotiated and joint meanings as they participate in activities inside and outside the classroom (Brown, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). As students interact with each other in specific situations they create relevant purposes and generate meanings related to the written and spoken texts they are sharing. As teachers work with their students they promote and support the purposes and meanings by scaffolding the students' thinking. In such a manner new learnings of and about language, literacy, and texts are developed.

A number of writers have also suggested that it is not sufficient for teachers to facilitate the development of these new learnings, rather teachers and students together should use their literacy learnings for genuine outcomes and social action. This may involve using their language and literacy learnings and critically examining their social worlds and identities, as well as confronting the barriers that bring about social division and inequities (Banks, 1995; Fránquiz, 1999; Shor & Friere, 1987; Lankshear & Knobel, 1997). In doing so students are encouraged to analyse and evaluate what they are reading, writing, saying, hearing and viewing in order to interpret and challenge their own and others' experiences.

When students and teachers work together to develop new learnings of and about language, literacy and texts and use these to interpret and respond to the world they can be said to be developing a community -- a community in which learners are engaged in particular practices. Wenger (1998 as reported by Barab & Duffy, 2000, p. 36) has suggested that "... a community of practice involves a collection of individuals sharing mutually defined practices, beliefs and understandings over an extended time frame in the pursuit of a shared enterprise."

In the research literature, communities have been discussed in terms of having particular attributes. Communities are seen as complex arrangements of participants and events where knowledge is socially constructed through actions and activities. Renshaw (1998) has noted that the knowledge in such communities is tentative in that it can be challenged and reconsidered. Collaboratively participants create the knowledge which can be altered as existing knowledge is questioned and additional information is gathered.

Participants do not just belong to one community, but to multiple communities which overlap (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Moll, 1990). Kamberelis (1995) has suggested that:

> ... most communities of learning are hierarchical, complexly differentiated, and historically dynamic social sites. They are full of specific individuals and institutional interests, and they are shaped by multiple interactions among a host of social and political forces ..." (p148).

Earlier, Myers (1992) suggested in his study of literacy book clubs, as examples of communities, that they comprised three main features. He referred to these features as "dimensions". They were membership, knowing and risk. Myers (1992) stated:

> Membership describes the degree to which words and actions, literate or not, created a sense of belonging or exclusion among participants. Knowing describes the degree to which participants defined knowledge of the world, others, and oneself as (a) received from an abstract authority, (b) dualistic - received from external authority and constructed from personal sense, or (c) negotiated by the sharing of participants' experiences and ideas. Risk describes the degree to which participants could be different in their meanings, could be inventive, or alternatively, had to reproduce highly conventional meanings to have club membership. (p. 303)

In discussing communities of learners, The New London Group (1996) has argued that members take on "multiple and different roles based on their backgrounds and experiences" (p. 85). Communities comprise experts and expert novices. The former are individuals who have "mastered certain practices" and the latter are individuals who are "experts at learning some domains in some depth" (p.85). As well as arguing that community members play particular roles, another feature of communities of practice offered by The New London Group is that the "affective and sociocultural needs and identities" of the members is taken into account (p.85). Finally these authors suggest that communities are places where members can take risks and can trust fellow members.

In drawing on these notions of communities and applying them to literacy learning, it is evident that communities of literacy practice are complex and dynamic, involving participants who interact through words and actions which indicate both their membership and shared aims. Participants of these communities construct knowledge together and individually. They take on different roles of expert or expert novice in creating language, literacy and texts and do so in environments of trust and support where risk-taking and individual abilities, motivations and needs are considered. In communities of literacy practice learners are engaged with language, literacy and texts in reflective and critically thoughtful ways. Based on such notions, I would argue that the following features would ideally be seen in communities of literacy practice. In the next section these features have been organized in terms of learning environments, teachers' roles, students' roles and pedagogies.

The creation of meaningful learning environments

One of the hallmarks of literacy communities is that the activities that take place there occur in meaningful learning environments. *Meaningfulness is gained by the participants seeing the value and purpose of the activities.* In particular, meaningfulness is accomplished by creating environments where connections between the students' lives outside the classroom as well as within it are made, and connections between their present and future lives are forged.

Meaningful learning *environments are also shaped by the introduction and use of authentic learning activities.* Authentic here refers to activities that are relevant to the participants and their situations. For example, the participants engage in activities that they recognize as making a contribution to their literacy development their lives as citizens.

Meaningful learning environments are also ones in which a range of activities are used to foster the comprehension and production of meanings. This range of activities allows for learning to occur in whole class group and individual organizational arrangements.

Meaningful learning environments also allow for a variety of topics to be introduced that create or extend students' experiences and knowledge, and build on their interests. By tapping students' prior knowledge and interests motivation is enhanced.

Teachers' roles

The teacher within communities of literacy practice is seen as having a number of roles which are enacted simultaneously to support the learners. Sometimes they are the expert and sometimes they are the expert novice.

The first role is that of having *high expectations of the students* in the classroom. Specifically the teacher perceives the students as readers and writers with various abilities and needs. However, irrespective of the abilities and needs the students are expected to act and think as readers and writers. This will contribute to the students' feelings of confidence and independence.

The second role of the teacher is to *give the students "voice"* (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Oldfather 1995). This means that students' ideas are acknowledged and respected. Students are encouraged to share their ideas and see themselves as equal contributors to the shaping of the learning that occurs in the classroom.

The *provision of challenge and choice* in activities and materials is the third role of the teacher. Turner Parkes, Cox, and Meyer (1999) have stated that "... activities that are sufficiently challenging and novel, yet malleable enough to suit a range of interests and abilities, seem to be the optimal goal" (p. 134). They suggested that "open tasks and opportunities for autonomy, collaboration, and self- regulation seemed to provide valuable access routes for students to adjust challenge and skills and maintain their engagement in literacy" (p.134).

The fourth role is for teachers to *allow students to self-select books and other resources.* A number of authors have demonstrated that self-selection of books promotes student interest in recreational reading (eg., Heathington, 1979; Wendelin & Zinck, 1988). Thus, allowing students to select books appears to be an important element in developing interest and enjoyment in reading. However some authors (eg., Mohr & Linek, 1995) have suggested that helping students to identify their own interests and assisting them to develop strategies for making book selections is also important.

Students' roles

One of the students' roles within communities of literacy practice is to *have a high level of participation and engagement*. This means that members do not see themselves as passive receivers of information, but are active in sharing what they know about topics, asking questions, leading discussions, documenting their learning and reflecting on and reviewing their work with their classmates and teacher. Again the roles of expert and expert novice are taken on as the contexts change.

A second role that students' adopt within such communities is that of *assuming responsibility for their participation and engagement*. The students see the value of the tasks that they are given and the self-selection of books and other resources, and assume ownership and responsibility for their efforts in contributing to community membership, attempting tasks and successfully completing work.

Consistent with a view that learners should strive to become strategic and self-regulatory (Brown, 1978; Paris, Lipson & Wixson, 1983), the third role for students is *to develop and control strategies for planing, monitoring, revising, fixing up and evaluating learning*. This role involves the development of metacognitive awareness and control before, during and after learning.

Multiple pedagogies

Pedagogies refer to teaching approaches that recognize individual abilities and needs and aim to develop deep understanding, higher order thinking skills, an appreciation of multiple points of view, and a willingness to engage in social action. The use of the plural form of the word is deliberate as it is argued that there is no single approach to teaching literacy (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999; Luke, 1998). Thus multiple pedagogies are used to engage students with resources which develop the their intellectual and social skills as critical thinkers. Teachers therefore should have a repertoire of teaching approaches which are used in a conscious, flexible and skilful manner based on the various contexts and the learners' needs. In this section five approaches are mentioned. They will be described in turn.

Explicit teaching involves the direct exposition of content and strategies through demonstration and modelling. The purpose of such teaching is to make students aware of their own and others' knowledge and strategies and use them appropriately and effectively in a range of contexts. By demonstration and modelling students identify the knowledge and strategies, their value, and application (Munro & Munro, 1994; Westwood, 1998).

Scaffolding has its genesis in the social constructivist writings of Vygotsky (1978) and Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) and describes how together a teacher and student construct a "structure of shared meaning" (Meyer, 1992, p.50). During scaffolding a temporary support is provided to bridge the gap between what students know and can do and completing a task without assistance. The temporary support or scaffold is removed gradually, and "the student completes the constructive process by assuming ownership and using the acquired knowledge" (Meyer, 1992, p.50).

Joint construction in this case refers to the joint construction of text. Joint construction of text involves the teacher and students in the process of creating texts together though using the relevant writing skills and strategies for particular genres. The teaching/learning cycle involves modelling and joint negotiation, leading to the independent creation of text (Literacy and Education Research Network and Studies Directorate, NSW, 1989)

Guided speaking, listening, reading, writing and viewing refers to the use of prompts, cues and reminders to support the various literacy processes. Similar to scaffolds they assist the learners to engage in the literacy processes by framing responses. They may take the form of a stencil, graphic outline, key words, pictures and the like.

Teaching for repetition and practice .The revision and review of work is an important part of learning. The development of innovative ways in which repetition and practice can be undertaken is necessary. Authors such as Pearson and Gallaher (1983) have called for teachers to adopt approaches which allow for guided practice before transitioning students to independent practice and application.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the creation of communities of literacy practice in classrooms can contribute to students' development of learnings of and about language, literacy, and texts. Such development can occur when literacy learning is seen as a social practice shaped by complex and dynamic participants and events. In these communities participants interact to construct knowledge, they take on different roles and are engaged with language, literacy and texts in reflective and critically thoughtful ways. Attention to the provision of meaningful environments, the teachers' and students' roles and the use of pedagogies such as have been suggested in this paper as features of communities of literacy practice will I believe foster these goals.

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